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## DR. JOHNSON'S IDEAS OF ART.

IF all we knew of this "great *Cham* of literature" was, that Burke, the author of the *Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful*, and Sir Joshua Reynolds, the president of an academy of Art, were among his nearest friends, and the latter his executor, whose famous discourses he was supposed at one time to have written, and certainly to have given place in his *Idler* to other of that painter's essays; that he at one time intended to have written the lives of the painters; that he was their mouth-piece in an address to George III., on his accession to the throne, and at another time to the public, on the occasion of their opening an exhibition; that he wrote an introduction to a work on architecture; that he made the epitaph of Hogarth; that he was wont to say of his predecessor in periodical literature, Addison, "he was the *Raphael* of Essay writers;" and, moreover, that he was known to interest himself in the welfare of indigent painters,—we say, if this were all known of Dr. Johnson, we should be inclined to give him a conspicuous niche in the temple of the devotees of Art. But, of a person so well known, as, thanks to Boswell, almost to be personally such, no one can possibly be led astray by such an accumulation of specious evidence.

In arriving at Dr. Johnson's ideas of Art, as of most other matters, where he confessedly talked for conquest, there must be difficulties, for even in his more deliberate writings, he was by no means free from the bias of jealousy, there being some instances where both Science and Art suffer in his estimation, when they approach too nearly the value he set upon literature. We know that there are various apologies to be offered—that he was in a measure blind, and showed himself in many ways not susceptible to the finer sensations. Thus, for instance, his obstinate denial of any influence upon him from the weather, insisted upon, perhaps, to too great an extent, yet, undoubtedly, in a large measure, true, shows, at all events, his indifference to the sentiment of Nature under varied atmospheric influences. His *Ramblers* and *Idlers* are singularly destitute of papers opportune to the seasons, showing a unison of feeling with them. We do not find but one, and that on Spring; although for two years he called the public's attention to his thoughts in a semi-weekly issue; and for the same duration, at another time, in a weekly paper. A few extracts from that essay will show how his thoughts run:

"The variegated verdure of the fields and woods, the succession of grateful odors, the voice of pleasure pouring out its notes on every side, with the gladness apparently conceived by every animal from the growth of his food and the clemency of the weather, throw over the whole earth an air of gayety, significantly expressed by the smile of Nature. Yet, there are men to whom these scenes are able to give no delight, and who hurry away," etc.

"A French author has advanced this seeming paradox, that

very few men know how to take a walk; and, indeed, it is true that very few men know how to take a walk with a prospect of any other pleasure, than the same company would have afforded them at home. There are animals that borrow their color from the neighboring body, and consequently vary their hue, as they happen to change their place. In like manner it ought to be the endeavor of every man to derive his reflections from the objects about him. He then finds in the productions of Nature an inexhaustible stock of materials upon which he can employ himself without any temptation to envy or malevolence; *faults, perhaps, seldom totally avoided by those whose judgment is much exercised upon the works of art.*"

Of such a poet as Thomson, there were many reasons for supposing that a man like Johnson would not sufficiently have appreciated the description of Nature, yet his grand style tells well in his praises of that bard:

"He looks round on nature and on life with the eye that nature bestows only on a poet; the eye that distinguishes in everything presented to its view, whatever there is in which imagination can delight to be detained, and with a mind that at once comprehends the vast, and attends to the minute."

Everybody remembers the criterion by which Napoleon estimated woman; but then the first emperor had a pique to gratify, and a stand-point to assume. But when a man, set up by his contemporaries as a monarch of their world of letters, manifests such a great lack of susceptibility to the finer emotions, as in most cases Johnson did, there is at once a regret that he had not that wide comprehension, so desirable in such a position. To be able to pass through beautiful scenery without emotion, argues an essential wrong in the elements of a thorough character. In such a light we can but view the anecdote related of him, that he used to laugh unmercifully at Shenstone for not caring whether there was anything good to eat in the streams that poet was so fond of; "as if," he would say, "one could fill one's belly with hearing soft murmurs, or looking at rough cascades!" In fact, as he said, no one should live in the country but those fit for it; and his ideas of its advantages, as being merely a place where one can have his time more at his command, and experience fewer detractions from study, certainly expresses his unfitness, and drives us to look for other reasons of his annual pilgrimage to Lichfield. He used to say that while at Thrales, "in feeding the chickens, he starved his own understanding."

Of the sea, it was very much the same with him. Ourselves are not so bewitched with the mad-cap waves, that we do not wish for hourly passages of the ocean; but we have felt enough of the peculiar exhilaration consequent upon favorable circumstances, to acknowledge a belief in all the love for it, that many express, in both its softest and wildest aspects. Not so with Johnson; he could not be made to think that a life on shipboard could be other than the vilest imprisonment.

Of the finer sensations that are aroused in us through the ear, he seems also to have been, in a great measure,

destitute. Music, because inadequate to the perception of it, he certainly despised; yet one of his warmest friends was the celebrated Dr. Burney, the historian of music; and it was in the reading of his book that the first recognition of his deficiency seemed to have come upon him, for he exclaimed, "All animated nature loves music, except myself;" and when rallied by the professor, he was convinced enough to say, "Sir, I shall be very glad to have a new sense put in me." Once, indeed, he acknowledged the purchase of a flageolet in early life, but he was honest enough to add, he never made out a tune. At another time he said, he knew a drum from a trumpet, and a bag-pipe from a guitar, and that was about the extent of his musical knowledge, and as for the art, it excited in his mind no ideas, and hindered him from contemplating his own; and a fine performer, to his perception, had no other merit than that of the canary bird. We are rather pleased, on the contrary, with one of his repartees to a person who was loud in his praises of the execution of some *difficult* music they were listening to, and we quite wish it could be thundered out in his own way in many of our concert-rooms, "Difficult—do you call it, sir? I wish it were impossible!"

Much, however, of his repugnance to this, as well as other branches of Art, we are persuaded arose from the constitution of a mind that revolted from anything like elaborate cants of praise, or undue devotion, on the part of their devotees. He could not endure any of the preliminary symptoms of insanity which certainly show themselves under great excitements in the sanest of temperaments. Nothing could make him more wroth than an expressed belief, that Garrick could ever think himself Richard for the moment, when he was performing in that part. If he could have felt himself the devil Richard was, he deserved Richard's fate, was the reply he would make. Boswell once told him, that he could rush into a fight, under the impulse of a certain tune. "Sir," said he, "I should never hear it, if it made *me such a fool*."

Miss Reynolds seems to think that Johnson was often conscious that his situation was unbecoming a man of culture, when he found himself unallured among the many frequenters of Sir Joshua's house, who were subdued by the attractive charms of Art. Indeed, she is inclined to think that the Doctor possessed "the invisible principles of a natural good taste in an eminent degree." One certainly does see that when he discoursed upon first principles, he not unfrequently showed something of an artistic acumen. Once, in conversation, he showed an appreciation of truth that Ruskin would certainly admire. "Sir, were I to have anything fine, it should be very fine. Were I to wear a ring, it should not be a bauble, but a stone of great value." Negligent in his dress himself, his good taste was certainly sure enough to rebel at anything like frippery in costume, and when a little girl was presented to him, arrayed in shining ornaments, he very properly exclaimed, "She looked like a native of Cow Lane dressed up to be

carried to Bartholomew Fair." Madame Piozzi relates a justifiable rage that he showed in their Welsh tour against artificial ruins and temporary cascades. When Boswell was once arguing to him that refinement of taste was disadvantageous, as making us less satisfied with everything that comes in our way, he replied, "Nay, sir, that is a paltry notion. Endeavor to be as perfect as you can in every respect." Nollekens' bust of him, it will be recollected, shows a head loaded with hair, which was modelled from that of an Irish beggar, an addition that met Johnson's high displeasure; and we are inclined to think that the "look of an ancient poet" attempted thereby, had better been sacrificed, certainly, so far as was inconsistent with an artistic rendering of his natural hair; for, however difficult the sculptor finds this portion of his art, we feel assured it shows only inability to make the best out of what is given him, when he makes a complete sacrifice of actuality to ideality. What Johnson said of allegory in Art we are also inclined to favor. "Sir, I had rather see the portrait of a dog I know than all the allegorical paintings in the world." Virtuosos in Art draw out both in the Rambler and Idler, a strain of easy satire and amusing irony, which it is pleasing to see united to a just discrimination between the collective and the individual, and to an acknowledgment of the possible value of his cabinet for historical and other reasons.

These paragraphs that we have been writing only show the symptoms of what Dr. Johnson might be supposed capable of, had physical circumstances not interfered with his enjoyment of Art. Take a tracing of the development of architecture, for instance, in the sixty-third Idler, and we discern no lack of a right philosophy in the view embraced:

"The natural progress of the works of men is from rudeness to convenience, from convenience to elegance, and from elegance to nicety. The first labor is enforced by necessity, and the savage shelters himself in the hollow of a rock, or learns to dig a cave, etc. The next gradation produces a house, etc. The mind set free from the importunities of natural want, gains leisure to go in search of superfluous gratifications, and adds to the uses of habitation the delights of prospect. Then begins the reign of symmetry; orders of architecture are invented, and one part of the edifice is conformed to another, without any other reason than that the eye may not be offended. The passage is very short from elegance to luxury. Ionic and Corinthian columns are soon succeeded by gilt cornices, inlaid floors, and petty ornaments, which show rather the wealth than the taste of the possessor."

The flight of Johnson's muse is an affirmation of what he believed, that poetry is a luxury, and not a necessity—an opinion, of course, dissented to by the choicer souls who find it as much an essential of their being to roam at times, with no guidance but that of fancy, as it is to breathe. This utilitarian view of things Johnson carried into every judgment. Labor, disproportionate to the utility of the result—he did not mean a utility that looked

to artistic education—whether in architecture or statuary, met his constant disapprobation. "A building is not at all more convenient for being decorated with superfluous carved work," seemed to be the scope of his estimate of its value. He wrote three articles in a journal of the day, relative to the choice of a semicircle or an ellipse for the arches of Blackfriars bridge, and laid the sole stress upon the argument of strength. So far as Johnson despised pilasters that supported nothing but their own capitals, he was right enough, had he stopped there; but his was a taste that would destroy the pilaster altogether, and leave the dead wall. So he satirized sculpture. "A fellow," he said, "would hack half a year at a block of marble to make something in stone that hardly resembled a man. The value of statuary is owing to its difficulty. You would not value the finest head cut upon a carrot."

Painting was made an exception in Johnson's mind, where he supposed the effect might not be disproportionate to the labor. He once remarked to Sir Joshua Reynolds, "It has often grieved me, sir, to see so much mind as the science of painting requires, laid out on such perishable material. Why do you not oftener make use of copper? I could wish your superiority in the art you profess to be preserved on stuff more durable than canvas." Sir Joshua, we are told, urged the difficulty of procuring a plate large enough for historical subjects, and was going to raise further objections, when the Doctor broke out in an exclamation, that soon showed how much sincerity, other than that of friendship, induced his regrets. "What foppish obstacles are these, sir! Here is Thrale, who has a thousand tons of copper; you may paint it all round if you will, I suppose; it will serve him to brew in afterwards. Will it not, sir?" addressing the brewer. Johnson was fair enough to profess himself no judge of painting, and acknowledged his inability to see any resemblance between a picture and its subject; and of that very exhibition of whose catalogue, he as a litterateur indited the preface, wrote to Baretti: "This exhibition has filled the heads of the artists and lovers of Art. Surely life, if it be not long, is tedious, since we are forced to call in the assistance of so many trifles to rid us of our time."

It was but a year or two previous to this that he wrote somewhat theoretically on painting, in No. 45 of *The Idler*, when he asserted that in

"A nation great and opulent, there is room and ought to be patronage for an Art like that of painting through all its diversities."

It is somewhat curious to note how he proceeds.

"It is not very easy to find an action or event that can be efficaciously represented by a painter, for the time of a picture is a single moment. For this reason the Death of Hercules cannot well be painted, though at the first view it flatters the imagination with very glittering ideas; the gloomy mountain overhanging the sea, and covered with trees, some bending to the wind, and some torn from the root by the raging hero; the violence

with which he sends from his shoulders the envenomed garment; the propriety with which his muscular nakedness may be displayed; the death of Lycas, whirled from the promontory; the gigantic presence of Philoctetes; the blaze of the fatal pile, which the deities behold with grief and terror from the sky. All these images fill the mind, but will not compose a picture, because they cannot be united in a single moment."

After mentioning one or two other examples, he concludes.

"If the design were not too multifarious and extensive, I should wish that our painters should attempt the dissolution of the Parliament by Cromwell. The point of time may be chosen when Cromwell looked round the Pandæmonium with contempt, ordered the bauble to be taken away, and Harrison laid hands on the speaker to drag him from the chair. The various appearances which rage, and terror, and astonishment and guilt, might exhibit in the faces of that hateful assembly, of whom the principal persons may be faithfully drawn from portraits or prints; the irresolute repugnance of some, the hypocritical submission of others, the ferocious insolence of Cromwell, the rugged brutality of Harrison, and the general trepidation of fear and wickedness, would, if some proper disposition be contrived, make a picture of unexampled variety and irresistible attraction."

It is portrait painting, however, that, in his opinion, must have the most appreciable value.

"Their chief excellence," he would say, "is in being like; and I would have them in the dress of the times, which makes it a piece of history. One should like to see how *Rorie More* looked. Truth, sir, is of the greatest value in these things."

In the same *Idler* we quoted above, he comments thus—

"This use of the art is a natural and reasonable consequence of affection; and though like other human actions, it is often complicated with pride, yet even such pride is more laudable than that by which palaces are covered with pictures, that, however excellent, neither imply the owner's virtue, nor incite it. Genius is chiefly exerted in historical pictures, and the art of the painter of portraits is often lost in the obscurity of his subject. But in painting, as in life, what is greatest is not always best. I should grieve to see Reynolds transfer to heroes and to goddesses, to empty splendor, and to airy fiction, that art which is now employed in diffusing friendship, in reviving tenderness, in quickening the affections of the absent, and continuing the presence of the dead."

He certainly showed no mean estimate of the portrait painter's art, when he wrote those lines on Hogarth:

"The hand of him here torpid lies,  
That drew the essential form of grace;  
Here closed in death the attentive eyes,  
That saw the manners in the face."

THE GOOD SIDE.—There is no object in nature and the world, without its good, useful, or amiable side. He who discovers that side first in inanimate things is sagacious; and he who discovers it in the animate, is liberal.—*Lavater*.